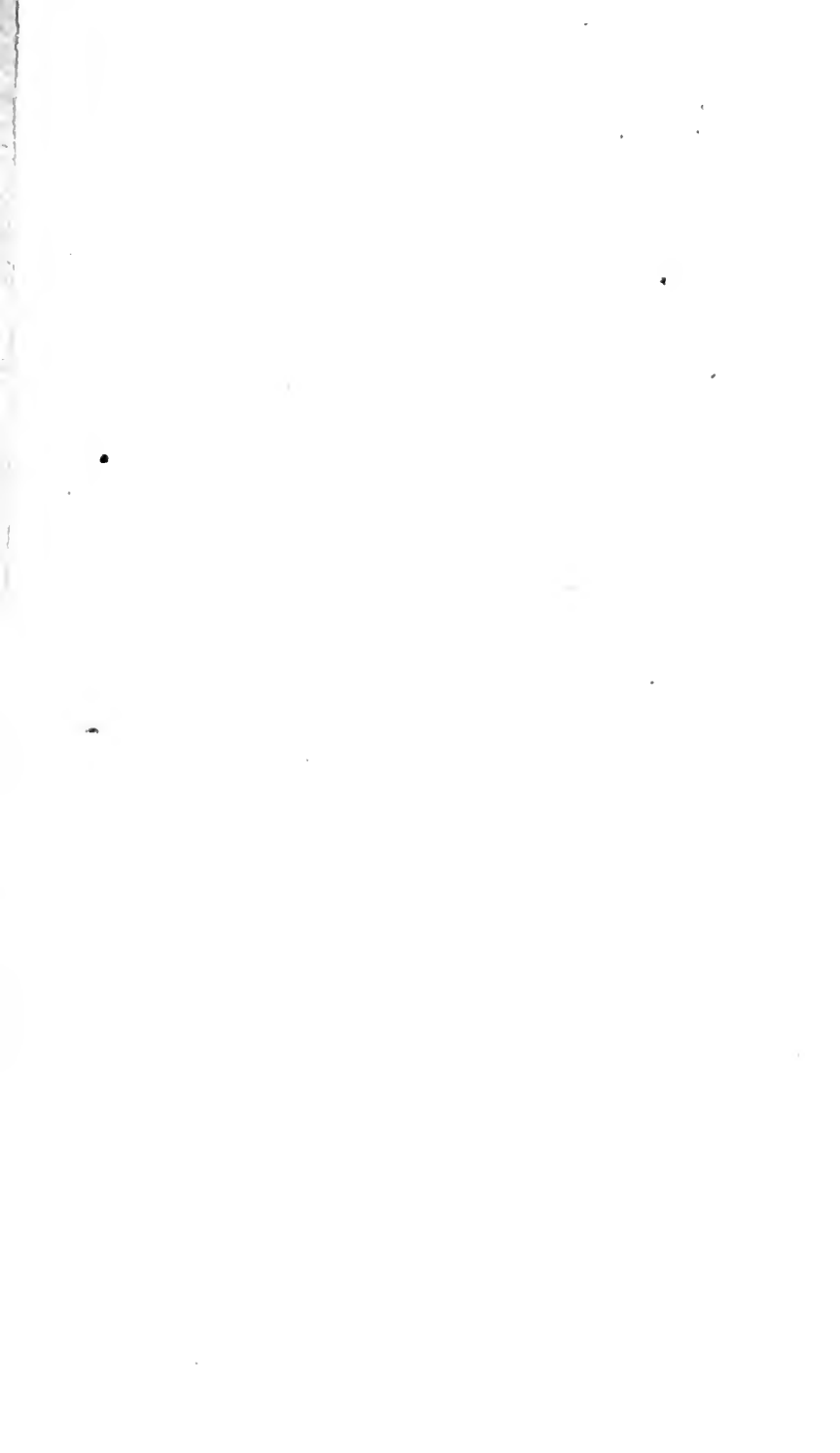




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SPIRITUAL THIRST.

A Sermon

BY THE REV. J. E. KEMPE, M.A.

PREACHED ON SUNDAY EVENING, JAN 23, 1859.

ISA. lv. part of verse 1.

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!”

THERE are a great many here who ought to have already heard these words to-day, occurring as they do in the first Lesson which was read at Morning Service.

I say there are a great many here who ought to have heard them, because it must be the case that a large proportion of this assemblage could have attended Morning Service if they had been so minded; and I take it upon me to express my conviction, that the object of those by whom these services are provided will be defeated, and they will feel that they do harm instead of good, in every case in which persons are induced by such opportunities to neglect morning attendance at their own parish or district church. Nay, I will venture to go farther: I will venture to declare my persuasion, that not only is it not the purpose of these services to draw any away from the ministrations which **are** duly furnished for them elsewhere, but that one of the chief things here aimed at is to awaken, by the **grace** of God, such an appreciation of

public worship and public teaching, as may lead to their being regularly sought in those places, and from those persons, to whom the providence of God more immediately directs you. I, for one, should regard it as a great calamity if the effect of this and other kindred movements (as, for example, the administration of the Lord's Supper in the evening) should be to shift, as it were, the working people's Sunday into the closing hours of the day. To say nothing of the separation which would thus take place between those who, in the house of God, of all places, ought to be found together—"high and low, rich and poor, one with another:" such a state of things would violate the main principle of the institution of the Sabbath. For, brethren, what is that principle? Is it not that on that day we should devote to a hallowed rest—a rest consecrated and made refreshing to the soul, as well as the body, by participation in the ordinances of grace—the hours which, during the remainder of the week, are given to labour? But a Sunday, driven (so to speak) and compressed into the evening, is rest during a time which (as a general rule) the week-day itself gives up, or should give up, to that purpose. Depend upon it, my brethren, that if once you bring yourselves to believe that you can do all that the glory of God and the good of your own souls require, in the way of public worship, after the "twelve hours" which Christ Himself teaches us to consider as composing the day are over; if once you bring yourselves to this, you have gone a long way towards surrendering one of your most precious earthly privileges. If the world does not step forward to claim those twelve hours for work, the devil will step forward to tempt you to desecrate them with amusement; and between the two they will soon be lost to God, soon be lost to your own everlasting welfare! I repeat, then, that there are many here who ought to have heard this morning; and I make my prayer to God, that any who have not heard may hear on all future third Sundays after Epiphany, as long as their life lasts, the words to which I shall now invite your attention: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!"

Now it requires some little effort for us to realise, in

all their force, the ideas which this language would convey to those to whom it was first addressed. As compared, indeed, with neighbouring regions, the land which God gave to His chosen people was "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, that spring out of valleys and hills;" but as compared with a country like our own, it was, for a portion of the year at least, little better than an arid wilderness. Upon one part of it in particular—the plain of Jericho and the region of Mount Thabor—the sultry season, during which there is neither rain nor cloud, falls with intense severity. The sun rises, morning after morning, with such a scorching heat, that, notwithstanding the copious night-dews, no ground can sustain its herbage without artificial watering. "The face of the country" (we are told) "becomes entirely changed; the soil becomes so hard as to exhibit large fissures, the fountains and rivulets gradually fail, and the few wells and springs that continue unexhausted, become inestimably precious.

Moreover, Judæa closely bordered upon districts of which this drought was at all seasons the prevailing character. Hard by was the great desert of Arabia, with its burning sands; that "great and terrible wilderness," which the Scriptures depict as a place "wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions and drought, where there was no water." Hence sufferings like these, described by one who had witnessed them, must have been matters of notoriety to the inhabitants of Palestine.

"When the calamity happens" (says the traveller Belzoni), "that the well, which is anxiously sought for, is found dry, the misery of such a situation cannot be described. . . . It is then that the value of a cup of water is really felt. In such a case there is no distinction. If the master has none the servant will not give it him. What a situation for a man, though a rich one—perhaps the owner of all the caravan! He is dying for a cup of water—no one gives it him. He offers all he possesses—no one hears him. They are all dying, though by walking a few hours farther they might be saved. . . . To be thirsty in a desert without water, exposed to the blazing

sun without shelter, and no hope of finding either, is the most terrible situation a man can be placed in. The eyes grow inflamed, the tongue and lips swell, a hollow sound is heard in the ears which brings on deafness, and the brain appears to grow thick and inflamed. All these sufferings arise from the want of a little water."

You see then, brethren, that to the Jew, with his personal knowledge of incidents like these, the image of extreme thirst would represent no trivial want of the soul; water provided for such thirst a blessing to which they who experienced it could not be indifferent. With the idea of "one that thirsteth," he would easily associate a drooping, fainting, dying state; a sense of need quite insupportable, and a readiness to pay any price, to make any sacrifice for its alleviation. And thus the invitation—"Ho, every one that thirsteth, and he that hath no money, come to the waters," would be to him the type of a summons which, under some circumstances, would thrill the whole soul with thankfulness and joy.

And such, no doubt, would be the effect upon men's minds of the Gospel summons, were they sufficiently alive to their condition; and just in proportion as they are sensible what their natural state is, so far do they gladly welcome the offers or the promises of refreshment which are made to them by their Saviour Christ. "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." In this last and great day of the feast of mercy—this day of the Gospel dispensation—Jesus stands in the temple of His Church, and to many of us issues this gracious invitation in vain. And why is this? Why but because we do not thirst,—because this world appears to us anything but the barren and burning desert it would be if we saw it aright,—because we know not the need, the urgent need, we have of that living water with which Christ is ever ready, and ever offering, to supply us?

Some, no doubt, there are who are indifferent to the invitation of their Saviour, although they neither have found, nor can hope to find, satisfaction for their souls in anything that the world proffers them. Its brightest

springs have proved to them like certain wells in the desert, of which, it is said, if the traveller drink, they do but increase his thirst, and aggravate his sufferings. And yet, I say, though weary, faint, and dying, they will not betake themselves to Christ, they will not come to Him that they may have life. These, however, are but a few. Most men, I repeat, do not thirst in any such sense as is contemplated in the invitation of the text. Would to God they did thirst! Would to God they believed and felt in what state they really are as regards the life of their souls, and what and Who it is that alone can deliver them from that state!

They are not (it may be) contented with this world. They want more of its wealth, its praise, its ease, or its pleasure. But they desire no more lasting wealth—no more unchangeable and unerring praise—no nobler rest—no purer pleasures, than those it has to bestow. The thirst they experience is just enough to stimulate them to more or less of activity in temporal affairs, and to make each draught of worldly success delicious, but it goes no farther. It never carries their view beyond this present world. They cannot, or will not, see the limit that is set to their career. They cannot see that eternity towards which they are every day drawing nearer, and in which their thirst—their sense of want—still continuing, and growing more and more intense, until it becomes agonising, they shall find nothing—no! nothing to slake it—none to dip so much as the tip of a finger in water and cool their tongue, when they are tormented in the flame of ever-increasing and insatiable desires.

But some there are, again, who have not even this description of thirst—who are satisfied with things as they are—with whom the present is still

“So like the past, and both so firm a pledge
Of a congenial future, that the wheels
Of pleasure move without the aid of hope;”

and who seek only to be undisturbed in this state of calm and complacency. An easy temper, a feeble, and yet,

perhaps, lively intellect—a dull moral sense, and a drowsy conscience—sagacity to discern which way sets the breeze of popular feeling, and readiness to trim their sails according to it, so that they glide on, tranquil, and unruffled by opposition—a fearful exemption from trials of their own, and a selfish indifference about those of others; but an indifference masked (it may be) under a certain pliant readiness to speak words of sympathy, and even to do such deeds of kindness as will secure themselves against trouble or uneasiness—ungrudging liberality in buying off the annoyance of distress—prudence carried occasionally very near to self-denial, but always stopping short of it—means sufficient to supply every want of this well-moderated habit of mind—a natural freedom from any propensity to dangerous, scandalous, or expensive indulgences—religion enough to answer every requirement of respectability, and to disarm the censure of all but “those over-righteous people whose opinion no one cares about;” these, my brethren, are some of the chief characteristics of a class whose condition is one of the most hopeless into which sinful man can fall—a condition in which there is no sensation of want, and therefore nothing to direct even a passing thought to the wells of righteousness and salvation.

And next, I will speak a little more at length of the class I mentioned just now, as being the small minority of those who neglect and despise the Gospel invitation—persons, I mean, who are sensible of an aching void in their hearts, which they have striven in vain to fill from the broken cisterns of this world; who do thirst, but not as for water, but rather with the thirst of the drunkard, who loathes the pure draughts of the fountain, and craves only for the stimulants which are of human compounding. If there be any here who are indulging the expectation, that after they have exhausted this world’s provision for the wants of their souls they will be driven (as it were) to fall back upon the waters of life, I bid them see in that drunkard their type and their warning. The heart-sickness, the feverishness, and the lassitude which worldly

excitements are sure to produce at last, are (think of it as they will) very unlikely to direct and lead them to Christ. In the diversities of the operations of His grace, I dare not go so far as to affirm that God never makes use of a man's having drained the cup of this world's enjoyment to the dregs, in such a way as effectually to commend to him the hallowed refreshment of His Spirit. But of this I am quite sure, that it is no law of God's dealings with us to do so. Nay, that it is the rare exception; and is never done where it has been reckoned upon, in order to pacify the soul in its occasional apprehensions about the eternal consequences of a life of sensual or worldly excitement.

There is however, brethren, a law in God's dealings with us, and it is this. If we will wean ourselves from the world instead of exhausting it; if we will dash from us the cup of its enchantment, instead of drinking ourselves drunk with it, and then waking to look green and pale upon the memory of our excess, and perhaps to mistake our mere natural loathing for the "godly sorrow which worketh repentance unto salvation;" if we will be at the pains to understand what are the lawful objects of our hearts' longings; the only and the sure means of their permanent and healthful refreshment, and set those objects steadily before us, employ those means in preference to all others, then the result is certain. The stream of grace will flow full and fresh beside our earthly path, ready ever to revive and invigorate us in our pilgrimage, never heating, satiating, sickening, nor cloying.

Let it not be supposed, however, that there is no genuine thirst for the waters of life but what can be easily and at once appeased: none which is painful and dark as with the shadow of death. "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. O God, Thou art my God, early will I seek Thee. My soul thirsteth for Thee: my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is. I stretch forth my hands unto Thee: my soul thirsteth after Thee, in a thirsty land. Hear me speedily, O Lord: my spirit faileth. Hide not Thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit. O my God, I cry in the day-time,

and Thou hearest not ; and in the night-season also I take no rest. My God, my God, look upon me. Why art Thou so far from my health, and from the words of my complaint?" In this language of the Psalmist we might imagine that we heard the very cry of the sinking traveller, when his eye ranges wildly over the boundless expanse of sand, and finds no verdant spot to alight upon, giving promise of relief from agony and escape from a horrible end. There is, perhaps, something of Oriental colouring in the Psalmist's representation. Our colder temperaments would subdue the expression of our spiritual emotions, but they need not lessen their intensity or impair their force.

The words I have quoted cannot be understood otherwise than as testifying, with inspired authority, to the existence of a feeling really religious, yet most unhappy, with nothing in it of merely nervous depression, but still full of suffering and apprehension. Yes, my brethren, such is ever the voice of the spirit that has been awakened from the sleep of sin, the cry of sincere and earnest penitence. And it is a cry which, in due time, is sure to be answered with the gracious invitation, "Come ye to the waters."

It is true that the thirsting, the hearing of the invitation, the willing to accept it, and the coming to put the will into execution, are all the work of God—God the Holy Ghost. No man cometh unto Christ except the Father, by the operation of the Spirit, draw him. But we know of every Christian that he is drawn. God worketh in him to will as well as to do ; and therefore may we speak to every Christian as one with whom it virtually rests to come, or not to come. He may resist the Holy Ghost—give no way to the motions of Deity within him—stifle conscience, refuse counsel, disregard Scripture, and allow the power with which God has gifted him to remain dormant—he may do so, and the fault is all his own if he do. There is no Divine hand laid upon him to keep him back from the waters ; but there is one to guide and help him forward to them—not irresistibly, but, I am bold to say, perceptibly, to any one who will be on the watch for its gentle touch.

I grant, however, that it is not always—I might perhaps go farther, and say, that it is not generally—easy to come. By wilful and long neglect men are but too commonly brought to so feeble a condition, that if at length they open their eyes to their state, hear the invitation, and catch sight of the object of their need, they have scarcely strength left (if they have strength) to drag themselves to the spot, and quaff a single draught, which may revive them for a moment before they die. Of this, however, we are sure. Really to feel the want, and sincerely to strive to obey the summons, “Come,” are the best earnestness we can have that spiritual death may even yet be escaped, though the green oasis may seem hopelessly distant. Until God opened her eyes to see the well which was close at hand, what was poor Hagar’s hope of saving her perishing child? “God heard the voice of the lad,” and his mother was by to help him to the restoring draught, which he could not perhaps have walked a step or lifted a hand to dip out for himself. And this we may take for a type of what our spiritual mother, the Church, may do for us in the hour of our need, and when, like the boy Ishmael, we lift up our voice to God. Through her ordinances and means of grace—her ministry of reconciliation—that word of God of which she is the witness and keeper, that saving truth of which she is the pillar and ground, and that sacrament of strengthening and refreshing which she is commissioned to dispense, she may become to us as the instrument of Christ’s salvation. when of ourselves we can do nothing to help ourselves—nothing but humbly, thankfully, faithfully, and devoutly receive the succour which she brings. “All my fresh springs shall be in thee,” is God’s promise to Sion, the emblem and prototype of that “Jerusalem from above,” of which it is our privilege to be citizens, “the Mother of us all.”

In nearly all those Psalms from which I just now made quotations, the fainting, dying state complained of is ascribed to being debarred from the offices of the Temple. And so it is in others of which I may remind you. As, for example, this from Psalm xlii. : “As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee,

O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God : when shall I come and appear before God ?” And this, again, from the 84th : “ How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts ! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord : my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well ; the rain also filleth the pools. They go from strength to strength ; every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.”

From language like this we learn that, as the Holy Spirit is the object of all pious and devout thirsting, so are the ordinances of God’s Church as the wells, the conduits, and the channels to which we must resort for the slaking of our thirst. It was (as you know) in the Temple that Jesus stood when He cried, in those words to which I have already made reference, “ If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.” Nor can we have better evidence that our longings are indeed longings after the sanctifying Spirit, and not mere carnal cravings which subtilly counterfeit the work of grace, than if they do so seek their satisfaction through the use of the means with which God has furnished us for the purpose.

I say not—God forbid!—that church-going is the final cause, the beginning and the end, of true religion : although the blessed in heaven are represented in the Apocalypse as continually engaged in united worship. Nay, I must have used my powers of observation to very little purpose, and must have very little knowledge of human nature, if I imagined that any one is necessarily in the way of salvation because the church or the chapel is attended with the utmost possible regularity. The motives and feelings of the world unhappily have their place in the sanctuary, as well as in the home, the shop, the counting-house, and the streets. But if I dare not say that I have a good hope that every one whom I know to be a constant attendant at church is really working out his salvation, I do dare to say that every one who is a despiser of public worship, or allows business, pleasure, or

indolence to cause him to neglect it, is certainly not in the way of salvation. In a word, you no doubt may be church or chapel-goers without being godly; but you cannot become or continue truly godly if you do not habitually avail yourselves of Christian ordinances

And thus I come back to the point from which I set out, and solemnly proclaim to you, beloved brethren, that I have cried in vain this night, "Come ye to the waters," to any who, having been heretofore careless and wilfully irregular about observing the Lord's day, in the way that every Christian communion deserving the name agrees it ought to be observed—namely, by worshipping in the congregation—shall go away no more sensible than they were before of the importance—the necessity, if they wish to be saved—of pursuing a different course for the future. If they say to me, "We do not feel the thirst you have been speaking of; when we do, we shall, no doubt, be ready as others to come to the waters:" I answer them, that in this, as in other things, the repeated sight of the supply is the best means of producing the want. Haunt the fountains of spiritual grace, though you may as yet have no consciousness of your need of them; and I pledge it to you, in the name of God, that in due time (provided you will be thoroughly in earnest), they shall not only become more indispensable to your comfort than food, and raiment, and sleep, but shall be in you sources of refreshment, "springing up into everlasting life."



